PIJSSL

Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature

A Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary e-Journal with SJIR 2025 = 6.034 & ISSN: 2581-6675

Vol. 09, No. 06 (June 2026) **DOI:** 10.51879/PIJSSL/090618

Email: editor.pijssl@gmail.com | **Website:** www.pijssl.com

OPEN ACCESS

Body, Spirit, and Ecology in *The Lama Who Never Was* by Parshu Dahal

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Abstract

Set against the fragile yet symbolically charged Himalayan environment, 'The Lama Who Never Was' foregrounds the interdependence of body, culture and ecology. It situates spirituality not within the institutionalized religion but within everyday practices, landscapes and affective ties to nature. The central figure in the novel, the would-be lama represents a body inscribed by cultural expectations. In the Himalayan Buddhist societies, the body of a lama is not considered merely as biological, but as a ritualized and symbolic body which is expected to embody spiritual purity, discipline and sacredness. The lama's body becomes a site of resistance, revealing splits in cultural community. Dahal, however, tries to show culture not as a static tradition but as something lived through everyday bodily practices like the rituals, dress, posture and movement through abbeys. The Himalayan landscape, however, functions as a sacred ecology that is inseparable from cultural and bodily life. By situating spiritual identity at the intersection of embodied experience, cultural expectation and ecological space, the novel articulates a plural and dynamic understanding of culture and hence, offers a critical reimagining of spirituality rooted in the body and the environment.

Keywords: *sacred ecology, Himalayan fiction, spirituality, body, ecology, culture*

Introduction

"*Humans develop deep relations with everything they come into contact with musical instruments, animals, rivers, everything*" (Dahal). It highlights the novel's view that human existence is shaped through intimate connections with both the natural and cultural world. In *The Lama Who Never Was*, this idea reinforces the interdependence of body, culture, and ecology, where spirituality emerges not from formal religious institutions but from everyday relationships with landscapes, rituals, and living beings.

Contemporary Indian literature has increasingly engaged itself with ecological views, indigenous identities and spiritual dislocation. *The Lama Who Never Was* by Parshu Dahal is a debut collection of eight short stories which is a significant contribution to contemporary Himalayan and Indian Gorkha literature. The novel holds a close connection with the fragile ecosystems and syncretic cultural traditions. It portrays the life in Sikkim and the surrounding Himalayan areas through stories that merge bodily experience, spiritual consciousness and ecological attachment. The novel transcends a religious narrative and interrogates how spirituality emerges from lived experiences, embodied practices and ecological intimacy. All the stories share one strikingly similarity with an unpredictable twist. *The Lama Who Never Was* touches upon bed-wetting, a fairly common ailment amongst children that has a stigma attached to it. It is about children being given to Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, a common practice amongst the economically and socially limited hill families.

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A large number of children from the hilly areas are drawn into monastic life, becoming the primary human resource that sustains the growing network of monasteries and religious institutions, often spending their lives within these confined spaces. From a modern perspective, it can seem troubling that a child's future is often decided by adults who place them in a monastery, committing them to a life devoted to the monastic robe and its responsibilities at such a young age. In this particular story, a would-be-lama fails to conform to institutional expectations which leads Dahal to criticise rigid religious structures while simultaneously affirming the sacredness embedded in everyday existence and natural landscapes. Apart from this, the other short stories in the novel "explores deep relations humans develop with everything they come in contact with- musical instrument, animals, rivers-everything. The Priesthood and the Neice are woven around two aspects of human emotions- betrayal and remorse." (Dahal)

The Himalayas often called the 'Abode of Snow' is more than a mere geographical range. They constitute a cultural and ecological continuum where religion, folklore, indigenous knowledge systems, and biodiversity intersect. The Himalayas cannot be viewed solely as a natural wilderness but rather as cultural landscapes, spaces where the sacred and the ecological intersect in everyday life (Chiron 33; Arora 88). It is associated with spiritual awakening, monastic authority and ecological virtue. However, the novel demonstrates that spirituality cannot be separated from materialistic world, rather, it can be interconnected to the body and the environment. The body becomes a cultural object upon which traditions inscribe meanings and nature emerges not merely as a scenic beauty but as an active spiritual entity.

This paper, through the interaction between body, spirituality, and ecology in *The Lama Who Never Was* develops a humanistic and ecological perspective. It criticises spirituality through the symbolic failure of the body of the lama while simultaneously reimagining sacredness through embodied experience and ecological intimacy. Therefore, Dahal, in his novel demonstrates and represents culture as dynamic, lived, and ecologically embedded rather than a specific tradition.

The Body as a Cultural and Spiritual Site

"In Himalayan Buddhist societies, the body of a Lama is expected to symbolize discipline, sacredness, and spiritual purity" (Dahal 22). One of the central concerns of this debut collection by Parshu Dahal is the interconnectedness between the body and spirituality. In this particular story titled ***The Lama Who Never Was***, the child is expected to become a lama but unfortunately fails to embody the idealized image of monastic purity because of his physical condition. Within the monastery, a lama's body is often expected to reflect discipline, purity, and spiritual transcendence. As a result, the body becomes a site of tension where social and religious expectations clash with the realities of physical limitations and human vulnerability. The body, however, is culturally produced rather than naturally neutral. "Institutions regulate bodies through disciplinary mechanisms that produce docile bodies shaped by power structures" (Foucault 136). Rituals and practices in a monastery become a way of using technology through which the lama's body is constructed.

The conflict between the sacredness in a monastery and the imperfect physical body of the child reveals how spirituality in Himalayan Buddhist culture is deeply mediated. The child is denied agency over his own body and future because the community views monastic initiation as a sacred duty. According to Dahal, the relationship between the body and spirit is complicated as spirituality cannot be entirely reduced to institutional expectations. The protagonist, however, observes that "the hills spoke to him more gently than the monastery bells ever had" (Dahal 42). This means that nature offers acceptance where the monastery offers rejection. The story highlights how a child's body becomes a medium through which religious obligations and communal expectations are fulfilled.

Similarly, in the story **'The Priesthood'**, body exists and interconnects with spiritual duty. It reveals a conflict between spiritual ideas and human weakness. The body becomes associated with the outer world while the spirit seeks ethical and religious fulfilment. The story portrays religious identity not just as a purely inward experience but as a specific performance through physical discipline, rituals, and social conduct. Hence, **'The Priesthood'** demonstrates that spiritual authority depends upon bodily practices.

In **'The Neice,'** remorse and emotional pain shape the inner lives of the characters, whose feelings of guilt deeply affect their sense of spiritual peace. The story portrays psychological suffering as something that is not only felt emotionally but also carried within the body, suggesting that physical existence bears the marks of past experiences, regrets, and moral conflicts. Through the emotional struggles of its characters, Parshu Dahal illustrates that healing often emerges through compassion, forgiveness, and the cultural bonds of kinship. The narrative ultimately emphasizes how emotional wounds become inseparable from bodily experience, revealing the close connection between the mind, body, and spirit.

'The Lame Squirrel,' on the other hand, presents a different understanding of bodily existence through the suffering of an injured animal. The story draws attention to the squirrel's physical vulnerability while also revealing the compassion, care, and emotional connection it inspires in others, highlighting the spiritual power of empathy. The squirrel's injury becomes a reflection of wider experiences of pain, helplessness, and marginalization. Through this narrative, Parshu Dahal blurs the boundaries between human and animal life, emphasizing their shared experiences of suffering, dependence, and the need for compassion. Across these stories, the body emerges as more than a physical presence; it becomes a cultural and spiritual site connected to identity, morality, purity, and belief. Rather than existing beyond the body, spiritual experience is shown to be deeply rooted in and expressed through embodied life.

Redefinition of Spirituality

Parshu Dahal's *The Lama Who Never Was* challenges conventional understandings of spirituality by shifting it away from institutional authority and ritual orthodoxy toward lived experiences, emotional bonds, and ecological interconnectedness. The collection repeatedly questions the assumption that spiritual fulfilment can be achieved solely through religious institutions. Dahal redefines spirituality by locating it within everyday human experiences. In the title story **The Lama Who Never Was** spirituality is shown as an inner struggle rather than a formal religious achievement. Although he is expected to lead a life of spiritual purity within the monastery, his physical limitations make him appear unfit in the eyes of the religious institution. However, the novel challenges this perspective by suggesting that true spirituality is not determined by physical perfection or strict adherence to rituals, but by one's inner faith, humanity, and connection to the sacred. His relationship with the surrounding hills and landscape becomes a source of comfort that the monastery fails to provide.

The redefinition of spirituality is also reflected in stories such as **'The Narsingha Player'** and **'The River,'** where the sacred emerges through the close bond between people and the natural world around them. These narratives suggest that spirituality is not confined to monasteries, temples, or religious institutions rather, it is found in everyday relationships, emotions, and interactions with the environment. Rivers, animals, music, and cultural traditions become carriers of spiritual meaning, showing how the sacred is woven into ordinary life. Similarly, in **'Raise Your Standards,'** human desires and personal struggles blur clear notions of right and wrong. The story implies that spirituality is less about unquestioning obedience to social expectations and more about self-awareness, reflection, and an honest understanding of one's inner self.

Moreover, Dahal's opinion on spirituality is deeply humanistic. In **'The Lame Squirrel'**, the injured animal becomes a symbol of vulnerability and suffering. The old farmer's care for the squirrel reflects a form of spiritual consciousness grounded in empathy rather than religious doctrine. Similarly, 'The Niece' portrays remorse and forgiveness as pathways toward spiritual reconciliation between characters that demonstrates ethical relationship and can possess sacred significance. These narratives focus on spirituality that is rooted within self-awareness, compassion, and ethical way of conduct rather than any religious institutionalization. Dahal, therefore, redefines genuine spirituality that emerges through ethical relationships and emotional understanding as a dynamic process shaped by human relationships and everyday life. This can be seen through Buddhist notions of compassion and interdependence.

Sacred Ecology and the Himalayan Landscape

The Himalayan landscape and its ecology occupy a vital place in Parshu Dahal's *The Lama Who Never Was*. Throughout the collection, nature is portrayed not simply as a picturesque backdrop but as a living presence deeply intertwined with human life. Rivers, forests, and mountains shape the emotions, beliefs, and experiences of the characters, influencing the way they understand themselves and the world around them. Dahal presents culture and ecology as inseparable, reflecting the idea of sacred ecology in which nature carries spiritual meaning and actively participates in cultural life. The natural environment becomes more than a physical setting; it functions as a source of memory, identity, and spiritual connection, revealing the profound relationship between human communities and the landscapes they inhabit.

The Himalayan region has historically been regarded as a sacred geographical space associated with Buddhist monasteries, indigenous cosmologies, and ecological reverence. The mountains are not viewed merely as physical formations but as spiritual entities that embody memory, ancestry, and cultural continuity. Chiron argues that Himalayan landscapes function as cultural spaces where ecological and spiritual values intersect (33). Similarly, Arora observes that Himalayan communities often perceive nature through sacred frameworks that integrate environmental ethics with everyday life (88).

In the story **'The River'**, water emerges as a symbol of continuity, memory, and spiritual connection. It exemplifies the ecological vision of functioning not merely as a geographical feature but as a repository of memory, emotion and cultural identity. The narrative portrays how human life and their emotions interconnects with ecological spaces and shows that spirituality is connected to the natural world. Similarly, **'The Lame Squirrel'** offers one of the perfect examples of sacred ecology within al, the stories from the novel. The injured squirrel becomes a symbol of ecological vulnerability and interconnected existence. The old farmer's relationship with the animal transcends species boundaries and reflects a profound ethical connection with the non-human world. The representations challenge hierarchical distinctions between humans and other living beings. The suffering of the squirrel, therefore, parallels human experiences of marginalization and loss, emphasizing shared vulnerability across species.

Although sacredness is reflected in the lives of the characters, the Himalayan landscape itself also emerges as a sacred geography in Dahal's stories. His portrayal of ecology resonates with traditional Himalayan worldviews that emphasize a deep, intrinsic relationship between human beings and the natural world. Mountains, rivers, forests, and other elements of nature are not treated as passive surroundings but as living presences that hold cultural and spiritual significance. The stories reveal how bodily existence, cultural identity, and ecological belonging are closely connected, showing that people are shaped by the environments they inhabit just as their actions influence and transform the natural world around them. In this way, Dahal highlights the mutual relationship between humans and nature, where both are bound together through shared existence, memory, and spirituality.

Conclusion

The Lama Who Never Was by Parshu Dahal offers a deep exploration of the relationship between the body, spirituality, culture, and ecology within the Himalayan world. Across the collection, the stories portray the body as a space marked by vulnerability, emotional pain, and lived experience. Physical existence becomes a point where cultural expectations, religious discipline, and human limitations intersect, revealing the complexities of identity and belonging. At the same time, the Himalayan landscape is presented as a sacred ecological space that nurtures both spiritual connection and cultural identity. Rather than dominating nature, human beings are shown as participants within a larger ecological and cultural network.

Through his rich portrayal of Sikkimese culture, Dahal expands the idea of the sacred beyond monasteries, rituals, and institutional religion. His stories suggest that spiritual meaning emerges through everyday bodily experiences, emotional relationships, and interactions with the natural world. The collection emphasizes that spirituality is not achieved by separating oneself from the body but by engaging deeply with

human emotions, cultural traditions, and ecological surroundings. In doing so, Dahal makes an important contribution to contemporary Himalayan literature by presenting culture as living, dynamic, and closely rooted in both the environment and embodied experience. Ultimately, *The Lama Who Never Was* highlights the intimate bond between people and nature, affirming how cultural identity, ecological belonging, and spiritual understanding are woven together within the ordinary rhythms of life and the natural world.

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